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ABSTRACT

Based on research of literature-based instruction in elementary schools that serve large numbers of economically-disadvantaged children, this paper discusses 10 factors that can enhance the implementation of literature-based instruction. The paper suggests that teachers: (1) provide extensive professional development opportunities; (2) provide for the increasingly diverse needs of students; (3) shape a unified vision of literature-based curriculum; (4) decrease the pressure for curricular standardization across classrooms; (5) stabilize decision-making policies; (6) redistribute the funds; (7) increase access to books; (8) increase time for reading and the teaching of reading; (9) support change in the institution as well as the individual; and (10) allow time for change. (RS)

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Literature UPDATE

Winter 1994

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National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning

University at Albany

Literature UPDATE

Winter 1994

It's more than reading real books! Ten ways to enhance the implementation of literature-based instruction

Sherry Guice and Richard Allington

We have spent the past two and one-half years studying literature-based instruction in elementary schools that serve large numbers of economically-disadvantaged children. We have been working to identify factors that shape the implementation of literature-based instruction and have found that various institutional features can either foster or impede teachers' learning about literature-based instruction. Based on these findings, we have come up with ten factors that can enhance the implementation of literature-based instruction.

1. Provide extensive professional development opportunities. Although each of these schools provided some staff development, none of these schools provided extensive, paid staff development. In every case, training opportunities were available on a voluntary (unpaid) basis. Two areas of expertise seem especially important in implementing thoughtful literature-based instruction. First, familiarity with children's literature and second, the expertise needed to organize instruction to meet the diverse needs of the children. Very few of the teachers in our study indicated that they had extensive knowledge of children's literature or flexible instructional organizational models. If these teachers had extensive professional development opportunities, then maybe they would consider themselves more expert in children's literature-a characteristic we believe is critical to good literature-based instruction.

2. Provide for the increasingly diverse needs of students. Developing teachers' expertise in new classroom organizational patterns is necessary because in each of the schools student diversity was increasing as a result of several other educational reform initiatives. For instance, five of the schools had eliminated transitional-grade primary classrooms in the recent past. In each of the schools, the numbers of children being retained was shrinking with a fairly strong administrative press for ending, or greatly reducing, retention for children experiencing literacy learning difficulty. In addition, all schools were becoming more "inclusive" by reducing the segregation of handicapped children from their peers through more extensive mainstreaming of these children in regular classrooms and a reduction in the use of "pullout" settings in both remedial and special education. While each of these initiatives seemed designed to better respond to the needs of children at risk, each increased the diversity teachers faced in their classrooms. Unfortunately, more often than not, such shifts were simply mandated with little or no staff development activity accompanying the mandates. In order for literature-based instruction to work for all students, teachers and schools must provide for their diverse learning needs through innovative approaches to curriculum, school organization, and professional development.

Two areas of expertise seem especially important in implementing thoughtful literature-based instruction. First, familiarity with children's literature and second, the expertise needed to organize instruction to meet the diverse needs of the children.

3. Shape a unified vision of literature-based curriculum. In all of these schools there existed multiple visions about how to organize instruction, how to design the curriculum, and what roles children's literature should play. For example, administrator descriptions and the school curriculum documents were not, generally, particularly reliable sources of information on the nature of the literature-based curriculum found in classrooms. There were also differences in visions of literature-based curriculum among key administrators in each district, although these differences varied in degrees between sites. Further, in each school only some of the professional staff was wholly supportive of the prevailing vision of literature-based instruction. That is, in schools where the prevailing view of literature-based instruction involved regular use of a commercial literature anthology, some teachers would have preferred a view that placed children's tradebooks at the core of the curriculum. Similar mul-

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tiple visions of literature-based instruction existed in schools where tradebooks and a combination of anthologies and tradebooks represented the curriculum. We believe that literature-based instruction works best when there is a more unified vision of the shape of literature-based instruction among all stakeholders.

4. Decrease the pressure for curricular standardization across classrooms. In each of these schools we found support for a relatively standardized school experience for children. We found district-imposed standardization in schools using a literature-based commercial program through the creation of a district curricular pacing schedule for completing the anthology. In schools using tradebooks we found that teachers created core book lists for each grade level in order to "protect" certain titles from all but designated teachers. We found an attempt to ensure a degree of standardization in schools using tradebooks and commercial materials by adopting that particular curricular model. We found teachers who worried that a lack of standardization might beget difficulties for students as they moved from grade to grade or school to school. We found community-parental resistance to diversity of experiences in the same grades in the same school. We found school board resistance to the idea that not all second graders would read the same books on the same days. Historically, educational equity has been defined as some sort of uniformity (same state curriculum, same number of school days, same outcome standards, etc.). In these schools a continued press for standardization influenced the implementation of literature-based curriculum since standardization routinely limited teachers' ability to respond to individual children's interests and needs. We suggest that different children may indeed need exposure to different literacy experiences; this may more likely occur if pressures to standardize curriculum are alleviated.

Dr. Sherry Guice

5. Stabilize decision-making policies. In most areas of this country decisions about what to teach, how to teach it, and what materials are to be used are left to that group of citizens elected by the community to oversee the schools, the local school board. In our schools there were differences in how willingly these groups approved decisions made by administrators or teachers. Some boards seemed to routinely approve such recommendations without much comment or discussion while other boards requested substantially greater detail and documentation for such decisions.

In some schools, teacher groups provided administrators with recommendations about curriculum organization and materials while in others administrators simply informed teachers on decisions made in these areas. None of these schools allowed individual teachers to make decisions about the curriculum for their classroom.

In half of these schools key administrators were relieved of positions or elected to resign, creating a lack of continuity in leadership. New administrators might simply continue previous decision-making policies and might support previous instructional practice, but some shifts seemed always inevitable. Some of the new administrators offered their own visions of literature-based instruction, visions that did not always parallel existing practice. Thus, instability at the administrative level influenced implementation as well. We believe that the implementation of literature-based instruction is enhanced when teachers, administrators, and children read, work, and learn together in a trusting and stable environment in the classroom, school, and district.

6. Redistribute the funds. All of these schools served large numbers of poor children. In each district there were other elementary schools that serve far fewer poor students. Still, the general pattern for distribution of state and local educational funds was to equally distribute the money on a per pupil basis. Thus, a school with 400 poor children out of 500 received the same local fiscal allocation as another school in the district with only 50 poor

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children out of 500. However, recognizing that economically-disadvantaged children require additional educational resources, federal education agencies allocate additional Chapter 1 funds to schools based on higher poverty or lower achievement or both. In New York additional state funds are allocated to schools with larger numbers of low-achieving students.

But such special programs usually require that the funds be targeted to certain children, not all, and to special instructional programs. Thus, in these schools we found a variety of special programs and special teachers, but little additional funding that was designated to enhance the core program. We found that each district made decisions to fund all schools comparably, even in the face of incomparable student populations. These schools, with many poor and low-achieving children, relied almost exclusively upon special program funds to address the instructional needs of readers in trouble. Funding patterns provide less money to the very schools that have the greatest needs. Further, we found much fragmentation of effort and a general interference with classroom instruction which substantially influences the implementation of literature-based instruction.

Dr. Richard Allington

We suggest that funds be used more flexibly to enhance regular, classroom instruction that meets the diverse literacy needs of students, rather than the common practice of primarily funding special programs to meet the needs children having literacy learning difficulties.

7. Increase access to books. Generally, the children who attended these schools had a severely restricted access to books. First, these schools had libraries that were, on average, 50% smaller than those found in schools serving more advantaged communities. Second, children's access to the libraries was severely restricted, usually to a single brief period each week. Third, the classroom libraries in all but a handful of the classrooms contained fewer than 250 books and even then the range of books was often restricted, both in terms of literary variety and levels of difficulty. These limitations, especially the latter, created substantial access problems for the children experiencing difficulty with literacy acquisition. Fourth, the poorest children had few books at home and purchased few books through book clubs or book fairs. Thus, some school programs had the potential to inadvertently exacerbate the access differences. Finally, few teachers were very expert about children's literature and could not often offer advice to children on other "comfortable" books they might read which also limited access. It may seem obvious, but children need easy access to a wealth of appropriate literature in literature-based instruction.

8. Increase time for reading and the teaching of reading. The school day at each site was segmented into relatively short periods of time. Classroom teachers were prevented from organizing the instructional day so that there were fairly large blocks of time for reading and language arts lessons. Instead, children left and arrived back from a variety of special classes and special programs. Thus, few teachers had extended periods of uninterrupted time for reading/language arts instruction. This general organization of the school day influenced the implementation of literature-based curriculum. We strongly suggest that teachers and children be ensured long, uninterrupted blocks of time for reading and literacy instruction; this can only enhance the implementation of literature-based instruction.

9. Support change in the institution as well as the individual. Too often calls for educational reform simply demand changes. Generally neglected is the issue of individual and institutional learning that must take place if change is to occur. Educational reform generally, and implementing literature-based instruction spe-

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cifically, require an enormous amount of individual and institutional learning. Individual teachers need to develop new forms of expertise that were largely unnecessary in traditional classroom and curriculum organization. Institutions, the school and district, need to learn also. For instance, administrators need to learn how to look at classrooms so that equity is monitored without requiring all teachers to use the same materials, on the same days, with all children. Districts need to learn how curriculum might be developed with teachers rather than for teachers and how to support teachers' continuing professional development beyond hiring outside consultants.

The peer support provided in these "learning communities" seems absolutely critical in the implementation of literature-based curriculum because teaching, like learning, is a collective social activity.

In those schools where we saw changes occurring most readily, we saw teachers supporting each other and administrators supporting teachers. The peer support provided in these "learning communities" seems absolutely critical in the implementation of literature-based curriculum because teaching, like learning, is a collective social activity.

10. Allow time for change. We have spent two and one-half years observing and listening to teachers in the process of changing the way they teach reading and language arts. We found literally not a single teacher who could not document and detail changes they had made in their teaching. Yet, there is a real impatience evident in the literature, legislation, and rhetoric concerning the schools we have and the schools we need. The "thoughtful schools" that have been called for will not emerge in full bloom overnight, though that often seems the desired end. Change is incremental and even with support and nurturing learning takes time, even in the best of cases.

Authors' Note: A version of this paper was presented at the 43rd annual meeting of the National Reading Conference in Charleston, December, 1993 and has been submitted for publication in the NRC Yearbook.

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